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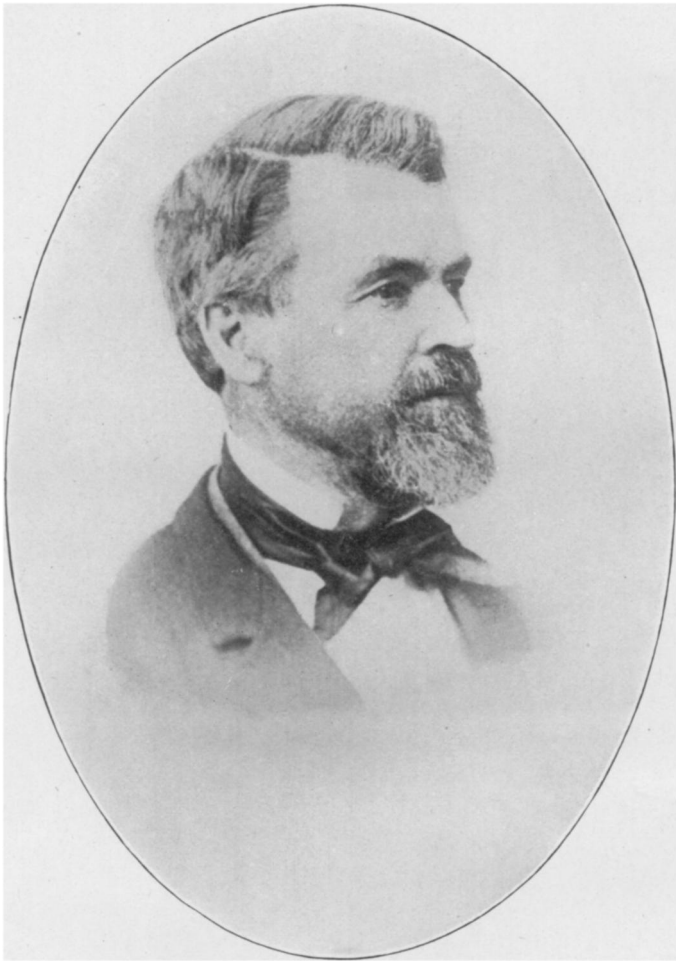
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INCREASE A. LAPHAM

INCREASE ALLEN LAPHAM, FIRST SCHOLAR OF WISCONSIN

BY MILO M. QUAIFFÉ

The most characteristic and comprehensive theme in all American history is that of the westward movement. From the time of the first feeble landings at Quebec, at Plymouth, and at Jamestown, the history of our country has been characterized by a steady westward surge of the population, reaching out eagerly for new lands to conquer, and in the process carrying the banner of civilization ever westward and establishing successive new communities and states. The present generation of students of American history has not been unmindful of the importance and interest which attaches to this westward movement, and has not failed to accord it, in the main, all due recognition. With the doings and deserts of our pioneer farm, canal, railroad, and city builders, our hewers of wood and drawers of water, in a word, historians have long made us familiar. Unfortunately, however, too little attention has been given, and too little recognition accorded, the equally important service of those among our western pioneers who laid the foundations of our spiritual and intellectual civilization. That man may not live by bread alone was stated long ago on excellent authority. The hewing down of the forests and breaking of the prairies, the building of houses, highways, and cities were all essential steps in the process of transforming the wilderness into an abode of enlightened civilization. Equally essential was the establishment of institutions of learning and religion, and the development of a taste for literature and art. The blossoming of these finer fruits of civilization inevitably tended to sweeten and refine the society of the pioneers, which other-

wise, engrossed in a stern physical struggle with the wilderness, must have become hard and gross in character.

Fortunate indeed is the pioneer community which numbers among its settlers intellectual and spiritual leaders fired with enthusiasm and endowed with ability. Fortunate it was for Wisconsin when in the very year of her birth as a territory, Increase Allen Lapham cast his lot for the remainder of his life with her. The service rendered by the intellectual aristocracy of pioneer Massachusetts and the other New England colonies has long been accorded ample recognition. The valiant labors of Increase Lapham in the service of the state of his adoption have largely gone unheeded and unrewarded to the present moment. Yet it is safe to predict that when the future historian shall come to scan the record of the first half century of Wisconsin's history as a territory and state, he will affirm that no man brought greater honor to her or performed more valuable services in her behalf than did the modest scholar, Increase Allen Lapham.

The frontier has ever been proud of its self-made men, esteeming chiefly, not who a man might be but rather what he was able to do. Lapham was a true frontiersman in this respect at least, that he was a wholly self-made scholar. He was born in March, 1811, at Palmyra, New York, "two miles west of the Macedon locks on the Erie Canal." His father, Seneca Lapham, was an engineering contractor, the pursuit of whose profession necessitated frequent family removals. Thus, in 1818 the family was located at Pottsville, Pennsylvania, where the father was employed on the Schuylkill Canal; two years later he was back on the Erie Canal and the family was residing for a second time at Galen, New York; the next few years witnessed further removals to Rochester and Lockport in New York, and to several points in Ohio.

The boy, Increase Lapham, was evidently a precocious youth. At thirteen years of age he "found frequent sale"

for his drawings of the plan of the locks his father had assisted in constructing at Lockport. About this time he gained employment, first at cutting stone for the locks and then as rodman on the canal. While engaged in stone-cutting, he wrote in later years, "I found my first fossils and began my collection. The beautiful specimens I found in the deep rock cut at this place gave me my first ideas of mineralogy and initiated a habit of observation which has continued through all my life. I found amusement and pastime in the study of nature, leading to long walks in the country, and as I found no others of similar tastes these rambles were usually without companions."

When fifteen years of age the youth followed his father to Ohio where he worked for a short time on the Miami Canal, removing at the close of the year, 1826, to undertake similar employment at Louisville. At this time, apparently, he first attracted the attention of members of the world of scholarship, for we find the renowned scientist, Professor Silliman of Yale, writing to thank him "for the liberal spirit which you manifest in encouraging a work designed to promote the public good"—the work in question being the *American Journal of Science*, of which Silliman was the founder and editor. Within a few months the boy made his first contribution to scholarship by sending to Silliman, for publication in the *American Journal of Science*, a comprehensive description of the canal around the Ohio Rapids.

At this time he was only sixteen, and his opportunities for schooling had been exceedingly scant. Yet his habits of observation and his powers of reasoning and of expressing himself in clear and convincing English might well be coveted by the average college undergraduate of today. A convenient illustration of these powers is afforded by Lapham's journal entry for October 24, 1827:

A smoky day. Mr. Henry, the engineer [of the canal], is of the opinion that the smoke occasioning our Indian summer, as the smoky weather is called, does not originate in the burning prairies in the West.

or in other extensive fires; but that it is from the decay of vegetation. (If it is possible for vegetables to be converted into smoke without combustion this will appear very probable!!!!)

He relates an instance of a very smoky day at New Madrid being followed by an earthquake; this he supposed to be the smoke that had arisen through the ground. I told him that I supposed it was owing to a peculiar state of the atmosphere which was unfavorable to the decomposition of smoke; to this he made no reply.

The years of Lapham's youth and early manhood from 1827-36 must be passed in rapid review. Two years in all were spent on canal work at Louisville; over three more followed at Portsmouth, Ohio; in April, 1833, the Ohio State Board of Canal Commissioners installed the young engineer (now twenty-two years of age) as its secretary at an annual salary of \$400. Thereafter for three years his headquarters were in the state capitol at Columbus, his work being that of secretary of the canal commission. Meanwhile the elder Lapham, advised and financially assisted by his sons, Darius and Increase, had abandoned the calling of canal contractor and settled upon a farm near Mount Tabor. This became the permanent family home, and here Seneca Lapham acquired a well-deserved repute among his fellows both for his sobriety of character and for his progressive ideas and practices with respect to farming operations. In the years under review Increase Lapham continued to pursue with enthusiasm his scientific studies and investigations, the range of his interests and observations widening with every passing year. Relations of acquaintance and friendship were established with a large number of scientific investigators, all of them, doubtless, much older than was Lapham himself. The study of botany and zoölogy, and investigations with respect to more scientific methods of farming were begun. In a communication on "Agriculture in Ohio," contributed to the *Genesee Farmer* in 1833, the modern doctrine with respect to rotation of crops and scientific renovation of the soil through the use of fertilizers was laid down. A third of a century later, but still over a third of a century in

advance of the recent movement for the conservation of the natural resources of the country, Lapham followed up this general line of thought by writing and publishing as a Wisconsin legislative document a comprehensive argument in favor of the conservation of the state's forest resources. Happy had it been for both state and nation if heed had been given in time to the vital problem to which he thus early called attention.

To a practical application of the Jacksonian theory of spoils politics was due the migration of Lapham from the capital of Ohio to the new-born town of Milwaukee in the spring of 1836. In later years he humorously explained that he was "reformed" out of office and employment in Ohio; at the time, there is reason to believe, the blow was not considered in a humorous light. Early in his canal career Lapham had worked under Byron Kilbourn, who now had thrown in his fortunes with the rising young village of Milwaukee. As a leading promoter of the coming metropolis Kilbourn had extensive business projects in view, among them that of procuring the construction of the Milwaukee and Rock River Canal, which would, it was fondly believed, go far toward realizing for the nascent city her dreams of metropolitan greatness. There was much demand for men possessed of engineering ability, and Kilbourn, who had conceived a friendship for Lapham which was to prove lifelong, now brought him to Wisconsin on a salary of \$1,000 a year. Thus Wisconsin became his permanent home, for he left Milwaukee only to remove in old age to a farm near Oconomowoc.

At the mouth of the Milwaukee River Lapham found, on his arrival on July 3, 1836, fifty houses where a few months before had been but two or three. In coming from the older settled portion of Ohio to Milwaukee he had entered a new world. Chicago was still in the height of its first mad speculative boom and conditions at Milwaukee differed only

in detail from those which prevailed at Chicago. Indeed, on reaching Detroit on his westward journey, Lapham wrote to his brother: "I am now, and have been since I arrived at Sandusky, in what might very properly be called the world of speculators: everybody you meet is engaged in some speculation; everything you hear has some speculation at the bottom. The hotel where I am now writing has suspended on the walls of the barroom plats of new towns; I have added the ninth." No wonder the impecunious young man, engulfed in such an atmosphere, proceeded, immediately upon his arrival at Milwaukee, to purchase three town lots for \$5,000, payable "one-half in one one-half in two years." How did he expect to provide the money to meet this obligation? He did not expect to provide it; he "bought them for the purpose of selling them again at a higher price."

Lapham, however, was never designed for a business man, and he never acquired more than a very modest competence in life. I have spoken of the speculative mania which then pervaded all the newer West merely to illustrate the sincerity of the young immigrant's devotion to scholarship, from the pursuit of which even the thrill and intoxication of perhaps the greatest boom the country has ever witnessed could detain him only momentarily. Within two weeks of his arrival at Milwaukee he records that he has made a map of the county (possibly a professional matter) and "done a little botanizing." Even earlier, while at Detroit en route to the West, he had taken time to write Professor Asa Gray an offer to collect for him specimens from the new region to which the writer was going. "Let me entreat you to pay particular attention to my *pets*, the grasses," wrote the noted botanist in reply; "I will see that you have due credit for every interesting discovery." Six weeks after his arrival at Milwaukee Lapham wrote to another botanical friend that he found many new plants at Milwaukee; and that "in order to inform my friends of what plants are found here and to

enable them to indicate such as they want I think of publishing a catalogue of such as I find."

Thus was conceived the idea responsible for the first publication of a scientific character within the bounds of the present state of Wisconsin, for before the close of the year there issued from the office of Milwaukee's newly founded newspaper a *Catalogue of Plants and Shells, Found in the Vicinity of Milwaukee, on the West Side of Lake Michigan*, by I. A. Lapham. It would probably be safe to affirm that this was the first scientific work to be published west of the Great Lakes, at least to the north of St. Louis. For in literary matters Chicago, whose commercial progress Milwaukee never succeeded in equalling, must yield the palm of leadership to her early North Shore rival. Leaving out of consideration one or two lyceum lectures which were printed after delivery, the earliest Chicago imprint of a scholarly character of which I have any knowledge is Mrs. Kinzie's well-known story of the Chicago massacre, published as a pamphlet in 1844; and this, a reminiscent family narrative, does not deserve to be regarded as scholarly in the true sense of the term.

In 1838, two years after his arrival, Lapham began the collection of material for a gazeteer of Wisconsin. Published at Milwaukee in 1844, it constitutes both Wisconsin's first book of history and the state's first home-made book of any character to be published in more durable binding than paper. So attractive were its merits that an unscrupulous rival author, Donald McLeod, more adept at wielding the scissors than the pen, promptly and brazenly plagiarized a large portion of its contents for his *History of Wisconsin*, published, appropriately enough, by "Steele's Press" at Buffalo, in 1846; and a copy of this fraudulent publication was recently offered for sale by a dealer, with due encomiums upon its rarity and worth, for the modest sum of thirty dollars.

Thus far we have followed Lapham's career in due chronological order. Some thirty years were yet to elapse before his death in 1875, years crowded with earnest, self-effacing labors in the cause of scholarship. In what follows I shall treat of his various scholarly interests and achievements in topical order, without regard to chronology.

Although himself self-taught Lapham's active interest in educational institutions persisted throughout his life. In 1843 he secured the adoption by the territorial legislature of a resolution to Congress petitioning a grant of land for the purpose of establishing in Wisconsin an institution for the instruction of the deaf and dumb, and blind, and an asylum for the insane. He is the real father of the Milwaukee public high school system. In 1846 he donated thirteen acres of land lying within the city limits for the purpose of establishing the first high school. In the spring of 1848 he was commissioned by the city as its agent to secure a loan of \$16,000 in the East for the building of schoolhouses, and he made the long trip to New York and Boston on this public mission. In the same year he proffered the newly authorized University of Wisconsin the gift of "a pretty extensive herbarium" of 1,000 or 1,500 species of plants. In March, 1848, by a meeting of citizens held at the council house "it was deemed expedient to establish a college in this city" and an executive committee of five townsmen was appointed with full power to consummate the desired object. Lapham was one of the five men charged with this weighty responsibility, and out of this movement proceeded the "Milwaukee Female Seminary," which today is represented by the Milwaukee-Downer College, one of the state's noble institutions of higher learning. In August, 1850, as president of the executive board of the college, Lapham had the satisfaction of delivering to its first two graduates their diplomas. When, in later years, he was offered a professorship in the school he declined the position, modestly explaining that his

lack of education and of teaching experience rendered him unfit to discharge the trust.

With our own State Historical Society his connection was long and honorable. Before coming to Wisconsin he had actively engaged in the work of the Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society. He hailed with joy the formation of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1849 and was one of the committee of three which drafted its first constitution. The society being formally organized, he at once began to labor to promote its collections. He served as its vice-president for twelve years, and as president for ten additional years. With the Smithsonian Institution he established relations of mutual helpfulness almost immediately upon its organization. Of his relations with this and other learned institutions more will be said in connection with certain lines of investigation which he carried on.

In 1849 Dr. Lapham proposed to the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester, Massachusetts, to make an extensive survey of the mounds and other ancient remains in Wisconsin provided the society would defray the actual outlay of money involved. The enterprise thus proposed was adopted by the Antiquarian Society, as a result of which the survey was made, the fruits of it being given to the scientific world a few years later in Lapham's *Antiquities of Wisconsin*. This work, published under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, is filled with the author's drawings, beautifully executed, of the numerous earthworks and mounds he had located. Students of American archeology will always owe the patient author a heavy debt of gratitude for having carefully plotted and described these evidences of aboriginal habitation in Wisconsin before the work of destruction which inevitably attended the advance of white settlement had gained much headway.

Thus in many departments of learning—in geology, botany, conchology, in meteorology, history, and archeology—

Lapham busied himself, acquiring repute among the scholars of Europe as in America, all the while earning his simple living by such professional work as he permitted himself the time to do. Perhaps no single achievement of his possesses more of interest to the world in general or has directly added more to the well-being and comfort of every one of us than his work in securing the establishment of a weather-service bureau by the national government. It cannot be claimed that he fathered the idea of such a service and its attendant possibility of foretelling weather conditions far enough in advance to make the information of real commercial value. Neither can Robert Fulton be credited with having fathered the idea of the steamboat. Yet we rightly regard Fulton as its real inventor, since he was the first to demonstrate the practicability of the idea. So with Lapham and the weather bureau. For twenty years he urged upon the Smithsonian Institution, the Wisconsin legislature, and other agencies of society the practicability and the immense advantage of such a government service. For twenty years, as a private individual he made records and observations, seeking to demonstrate his claims. But in the nature of the case (as Lapham repeatedly pointed out) only some powerful agency like the national government could take the many observations at different points necessary to the success of the work, assemble their results, and make them known throughout the nation in time to be of practical use to the public. Finally, the persistent seeker after the public good succeeded in attracting the notice of men powerful enough to compel the attention of Congress. As a result the law for the incorporation of the signal service was passed. How the result was achieved by Lapham may best be told in the words of a man to whom he had appealed for assistance. At the meeting of the National Board of Fire Underwriters, held in New York in April, 1875, a resolution to appoint a special committee to correspond with the United States Signal Service Department in

relation to wind as an element in fire risks was under consideration when Hon. E. D. Holton rose and said:

There is a little man who lives in my town about so high (holding his hand a little lower than his shoulders) who lives in an obscure part of the town, and is known to comparatively few people in the town. You go to his house and find it filled with all the evidences of science, specimens from the vegetable world and the mineral world. Going to London a few years ago I was given by this little man a letter of introduction to Sir William Hooker, custodian of the Kew Gardens, which secured for me eminent entertainment and influence. Five years ago as I was about to leave my house to go to Richmond, Virginia, to attend a meeting of the National Board of Trade, he came to my house and had a resolution drawn to be submitted to the National Board of Trade, declaring that the national government should organize a service to *look after the minds of the continent of America*.

When I came to Richmond I presented that resolution. It received a most eloquent second from the late General Wolbridge, an eminent citizen of New York. The National Board of Trade immediately passed the resolution. As soon as it was passed I sent it to my friend, General Paine, then member of Congress from my district in Wisconsin, and in an incredibly short space of time for that august body—which is supposed to have at least as much red tape as the National Insurance Company—it was passed. I did not expect that the wind question would meet me at this angle of the insurance trade, but it seems it has.

That gentleman I will name. I rise to make these remarks and I wish to speak his name in this connection, because out of his labors so persistent, in his humble house, so unknown to his countrymen—for he is better known in foreign circles of science than in his own country—and through his labors and instrumentality, this thing has been brought into its present shape. His name is Dr. Increase Allen Lapham of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

And how, it may be asked, did Lapham's fellow-men requite his lifelong labors devoted to the public good? The answer which must be made affords much support to the proverbial belief in the ungratefulness of republics. When in 1870 Congress passed the bill providing for the weather-signal service, its execution was entrusted to the chief signal officer of the army. By him Lapham was employed for a short time as special assistant in the War Department at a yearly salary of \$2,000. When he sent home (he was stationed at Chicago) to his daughter the proceeds of his first month's wages, she wrote to her brother as follows:

Last Friday father sent home \$128.03 to be deposited as the first money of any amount he ever received for any scientific occupation (regular salary at least) and Thursday afternoon I was down town and met B. He said he had been around among some of father's friends and collected \$100 to make father a life member of the Chicago Astronomical Society—(You know this society owns the "big telescope" at Dearborn Observatory).

I forbear to quote the daughter's delighted remarks which follow; more profitable will it be for us to consider for a moment the bitter irony of this situation. After more than forty years of zealous public service to receive so pitiful a salary, his first tangible reward, and to have this discontinued within a few months time! To be fitted both by inherent tastes and lifelong training to enjoy and profit by membership in such an association, and yet unable, because our countrymen estimate the services of scholars so low, to pay the paltry membership fee! Here, indeed, is the cross on which in the United States today we crucify scholarship.

One other matter and I shall conclude. Before he left Ohio Dr. Lapham had labored to induce the legislature to make provision for a geological survey of that state. From the time of his arrival in Wisconsin he strove as an individual to carry out such a survey here. Necessarily in order to do it thoroughly and to publish its results the power of the state must be brought into play. At length in 1873 provision was made by statute for a geological survey of Wisconsin and Governor Washburn appointed Dr. Lapham chief geologist to have the direction of the enterprise. The work was pushed vigorously and efficiently throughout the seasons of 1873 and 1874. Suddenly, in January, 1875, Governor Taylor removed Dr. Lapham in order to make a place for one of his spoils-seeking supporters. According to the *American Journal of Science* the new geologist's "sole recommendation for the position was political services, no one having ever heard of him before as acquainted with geology or any other science." Thus finally did our state requite its first scholar—

first certainly from the viewpoint of chronology, and probably first from every other viewpoint. "Knowing that time, which cures all things," wrote the three assistant geologists he had chosen two years before, "will do you ample justice, and feeling most strongly the irreparable loss that the state has sustained in the disseverment of your connection with the survey, we remain with the most sincere respect, Your obedient servants." As an indication of the quality of the assistants selected by Dr. Lapham it may be noted that one of the men who thus testified this appreciation of their deposed chief was Thomas Chrowder Chamberlin, who has been for many years chief geologist of the University of Chicago.

Time indeed cures all things, notwithstanding that the mills of the gods grind slowly. Of Dr. Lapham's spoilsman successor as chief geologist of Wisconsin, it may still be said, as at the time of his appointment, that his reputation as a scientist yet remains to be made. Governor Taylor, who made the removal, sleeps in silent Forest Hill within sight of the capitol where formerly he ruled a state; while in the holy of holies of the beautiful new state capitol, the governor's reception chamber, in the midst of famous soldiers, explorers, and legislators, an eminent artist has chosen to depict the application of scientific knowledge to the benefit of mankind in the person of Doctor Lapham seated at his desk, before him an open manuscript, and on the wall nearby, supported by two children typifying the winds, his map of the United States, showing the first storm traced across the country. More recently still, prompted by the urging of citizens of the locality, the federal government has given to the highest eminence in Waukesha County, overlooking the beautiful lake region which Dr. Lapham so loved in life, the name of Lapham Peak. Time is slowly proving his worth. More fitting memorials than these he could not have asked.